

Hloma Mathonsi, the Zulu blacksmith: a record by the Reverend H. F. O. Dedekind in 1929

by

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ABSTRACT

The missionary Rev. H. F. O. Dedekind visited and photographed a Zulu smith in 1929 in the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River valley of Natal. The account of this visit contains information of both historical and ethnographic interest, including some unique observations on local smithing.

INTRODUCTION

Relatively little accurate source material has been published on historical Zulu metal-working. Several of the accounts contain errors which show that the writers did not understand the processes involved. This is particularly true of smelting which does not seem to have been observed at first hand by any of the authors. Bryant (1949), for example, described the casting of iron ingots while Holden (1866) mentions hollow sandstone furnaces and eland-horn tuyéres—things which we know did not exist.

The picture is somewhat better with regard to smithing, probably because, unlike smelting, this practice did not disappear with the introduction of imported factory-produced metal in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed it can still be observed today in a few places (Mertens & Schoeman 1975). However, even with smithing, there are few first-hand accounts that contain any wealth of detail and illustration (Angus 1849, Bryant 1929 1949, Gibson 1911).

The Rev. Dedekind's account is therefore of considerable interest. It contains information not available elsewhere, for example on the bellows, tuyére, fuel and anvil. It is also unique in its inclusion of biographical information on the smith and his ancestors.

THE REVEREND H. F. O. DEDEKIND

Rev. Dedekind was born in 1882 at Nazareth, a Hermannsburg mission near Elandskraal in the valley of the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River, a major tributary of the Thukela. Nazareth had been founded by his father in 1878. From 1902 to 1908 he studied at the Hermannsburg Mission Institute in Germany, where he was ordained. On returning to South Africa he married and served as pastor to the German congregation at Elandskraal until 1913 when, on his father's death, he took over the Nazareth Mission. Here he built a new stone church and also worked on a translation of the Bible into Zulu, a Zulu-German dictionary and the

organisation of church music, in addition to his missionary duties. He died in 1932, during the malaria epidemic, leaving his wife and ten children.

The Rev. Dedekind was also a keen photographer, making his own contact prints from glass negatives. Ingenuity was required to overcome the lack of electricity at Nazareth. He devised a system whereby he controlled the shutter on the window of his darkroom while his wife stood outside holding a mirror angled in the right direction. The photographs accompanying this article were processed in this way.

The Rev. Dedekind's account of his visit, together with the captions to the photographs, was written to accompany the collection of smithing equipment that was to be sent to the Hermannsburg Mission Institute in Germany for their museum. It is reproduced here without alteration but for the deletion of some anecdotal details; the full account is available from the Natal Museum. Modern Zulu spellings are added in parentheses where these differ from the original. Numbered end notes, essentially of an explanatory nature, have also been added.

HLOMA MATONSI (MATHONSI), THE ZULU BLACKSMITH

'Although I had heard the art of the Zulu blacksmith mentioned from time to time, I had never had the good fortune to see such a forge, let alone of meeting the blacksmith in person. Nor had I any notion that one of them was still practising his noble art in our vicinity. . . .

We had been told where he lived: "Below the Hlazakazi Mountain, beyond the Malakata Mountain."¹ This indicated the direction and soon we were on our way to Zululand mounted on sturdy and comfortable horses, equipped for a full day's journey. To start off the road was not too bad but when we had left the last "farm" behind us, the going was getting a bit uncomfortable. Far below us we saw the river Umzinyati, (possibly contracted from *umuzi wezinyati*—the abode of the buffalo)² i.e. the Buffalo River, which we had to cross. We had to literally scramble down, leading our horses behind us. We now followed the course of the river until we were forced to cross it. There was no ford in sight. We had to pick our way over large rocks and many boulders, luckily without mishap. Up to now we had asked at every kraal: "Wak'epi Uhloma Matonsi?" (Where does Hl. M. live?) Arriving in Zululand we met up with a Zulu woman working on the construction of a new house. Here also the same question was put. She however countered with: "What do you want there?" We were not inclined to tell her, so to the end she persisted with her question and we with ours; we did not come off short though, for while we still knew the direction, she never found out what we wanted of Hloma! Up to now we had travelled mainly downhill, but now we had to climb steeply. The path was difficult for the horses. Large boulders were strewn everywhere. At times the track was hardly discernible, not a human being was in sight. After about an hour's ride we came to a kraal, the *induna*³ there gave us final directions to Hloma's home, where we arrived after a three hours' ride. After assuring ourselves that Hloma Matonsi was indeed at home, we dismounted and had lunch. Now Hloma led us to his workshop, which lay some distance above his hut.⁴ Here we found an enclosure ringed with a stone wall, the entrance to which was protected by a windshield made of grass.⁵ This 'kraal' lay within a small grove of trees. Such groves of trees are often seen. Hloma had thinned out one of the groves thus affording protection

against wind and sun. The forge was put together, the bellows assembled, and the grandson took his place at the bellows. These are open at the top. On the upstroke they are opened and on the downstroke closed. Coals are placed in front of the pipe and now the action starts. The whole art was demonstrated to us. It looked so easy, but the bellows are in fact very difficult to manipulate. The bellows are made out of goatskins, which are tanned and carefully treated with fat to keep them elastic. Horns are attached to the bellows. These are not always available—at times a beast has to be slaughtered specially to provide just the right type of horns. The bellows are sewn together with the so-called ‘voorslag’.⁶ This is made from the tanned skins of game, either of the steenbok, *iqina* (*ighina*) or of the bushbuck, *imbabala* or *inkonka* (*unkonka*), the last being preferred, because their skins are more durable. From the skin one cuts a thin strip, this is moistened and worked upon with another thin strip; in this way it is being stretched and attains a more constant thickness. The so-called ‘thread’ is now carefully pointed at one end and sewing commences without any needle.⁷ Apparently this is by no means easy, but an expert can proceed at quite a pace. The pipe is made out of dense clay. After it is shaped it is embedded in dry cow-dung and fired, which makes the pipe more durable.⁸ Nevertheless, the pipe still has to be handled with care. I now refer to the photograph at hand. To secure the forge and prevent it from moving sideways the horns as well as the pipe are held laterally by pegs and the horns are secured by a long stick weighed down by stones to keep them in position. Charcoal is now placed in front of the pipe. Unfortunately when this photograph was taken, there was none. The first time we took photographs there was ample coal, but those photos were a complete failure, and we had to return another time for these. (Hloma uses the *umnqawe* or *umtolo* tree, both hardwoods, to make his charcoal, which produces intense heat).⁹ Now the hissing of the forge begins. Hloma sits comfortably ensconced in his work, surveys his domain at leisure and takes his homemade hammer in hand,—he takes a pinch of snuff—hauls the iron out of the fire and starts ‘beating the tattoo’. He has no anvil, instead he uses a rock, which must be extraordinarily tough, because even large rocks cannot endure red hot metal being worked on them, they would soon splinter. This stone is rare—it cost him a cow and is called *inondo*.¹⁰ Next to him lies another stone which is not visible in the photograph. This is a type of sandstone, hollowed out to hold the water used in tempering the artifacts. Another stone is used for sharpening.

Having seen his art demonstrated, we approached him with the request to sell us the whole outfit. We had first taken some photos, which puzzled him no end—he had no idea of what we were doing. When he heard our request he was again greatly puzzled—why should we want his tools? Anybody knowing the native knows how he clings to his possessions especially if his own sweat happens to stick to them because he fears that one day he may be bewitched by means of them. . . . It only came to my notice a few days ago how difficult it was for him to part from his possessions, and I felt genuinely sorry for him when he said: ‘I gave everything gladly but “*yeka isando sami, yeka isando sami*”, leave my hammer, leave my hammer.’ I tried to console him and indicate how many rejoiced with me because he had sold everything to us. . . . It shows how difficult it was for him to part from his things, it took me seven months to get all the items after frequent promptings.

He is already a shrivelled old man. He took part in the great Zulu war, but was not present at the main battles of Isandhlwana, Rorkes Drift, Nkambula, Hlobane, Eshowe,—only at the defence of the Royal Kraal¹¹ did he hear the whine of the bullets. He belongs to the regiment *Kandempemvu*¹² one of the last formed by Cetshwayo as a free king.

After we had arranged everything we started on the way home. We chose an easier way as the route we had come by would have been too steep in places on the homeward run. At first we rode northwards past the Malakata Mountain and crossed the Buffalo River much higher up. We arrived back here before sundown safe, but very tired. . . .

As already mentioned, Hloma belongs to the Matonsi tribe. The Matonsis have their ancestral seat in the vicinity of Eshowe, Edhlokweni¹³ (Edlokweni) as they say. There still reigns a king, viceroy Matonsi Shekimbuya, son of Ndlovu, who is son of Dangazele. Hloma is descended from a well known family of chieftains, his father lived under the Mahlaba Mountain¹⁴ next to the Buffalo River. He was a great chieftain, but lost his following during the Mbambata Rebellion in 1906. He took part in this rebellion and was the father of my Mission School teacher Timoth Matonsi, and was called Gamulake. Hloma then left the Mahlaba Mountain and settled at the old Matonsi settlement below the Hlazakazi Mountain in Zululand. Unfortunately he was able to tell me little about his ancestors. For a long time his family has resided along the Buffalo River. His father was called Ntunisa, whose brother, Nama, was a famous hero during the Zulu war. When Cetshwayo's regiment crossed the Buffalo River, it was Nama who led his men against the intruders, he fought so bravely that the intruders were forced back. It is said that he was in such a frenzy, that when he received his death blow, he did not fall down until the robbers had retreated across the river.¹⁵ One of his nephews was captured at that time together with his sister and they ended up as slaves for many years, but



Fig. 1. 'Hloma Matonsi's kraal. Various sons live with him. Between the houses are peach trees, in the foreground all sorts of bushes. Between them the numerous iron-stones,²² called *itshansi*.'



Fig. 2. 'Hloma Matonsi's smithy. It is a sort of round kraal planted with trees and surrounded by a wall. The youth who holds the bellows is a grandson of Hloma, as also the small boy who peeps out behind the grandfather. I had to get the large stone rolled forward to be able to take the picture.'

were eventually freed again. This man now lives at the Mission Station, but is still heathen. The father of Ntunisa was Nomazanga, who was a son of Nomogobho, whose father was Sikunyane, a man, who according to legend lived even before King Senzangakona, the father of Shaka. The salute of the Matonsi family is *Dunga*, it is thought that the ancestor of the Matonsi family was called *Dunga*, that is why to this day the salute of a Matonsi is *Dunga*. One does not address a Matonsi as *Eh Matonsi*, but as *Eh Mngane Dunga*. Thus various families have their individual salute,¹⁶ the Zulu Family originally was addressed as *Lufenulwenja*, but as this is not a particularly flattering word, it is not used any longer, today the salute is *Ndabezita*, the original salute *Isitakazelo* of the AmaMbata family, the Qwabe family *Gumede*. The king was never spoken to directly, one only saluted him as *Mntwana* or *Silo* or as a special adulation as *Baba* or *Eh, Nkosi! Wen, omnyama, wena wakula belibele*.¹⁷

The art of the blacksmith is not normally passed on from father to son. Hloma however, did learn his trade from his father Ntunisa, who for a while lived in the great and famous Nkandhla Forest,¹⁸ where the king Cetshwayo lies buried and where in 1906 the rebels under the great chief Bambata met with their heavy defeat and where Bambata met his death. Ntunisa learned the trade off other blacksmiths. Usually only spears were made as well as hoes. Earlier the now very rare rings, heavy bracelets and other ornaments were made out of copper. Brass rings were so valuable that one had to pay a large ox for a single bracelet, as a matter of fact the



Fig. 3. 'A more exact picture of the smithy. On the left one sees the heap of iron; the hammer which Hloma holds in his hand is his own make; in front of the anvil is the so-called *ishungu* snuff-box which, they say, he holds in one hand in taking snuff. The stone is called *inondo* and is not often to be got; he had to pay a cow for this stone.'

price was so high that it could pay for a wife. These were called *umdaka* or *ingxota* (*ingxotha*). But when once an epidemic illness spread, it was alleged by the witchdoctors that the brass, which was imported from the Portuguese territory was to blame, with the result that all such brass objects were severely forbidden.¹⁹ It is extremely difficult to acquire these today; in spite of intensive enquiries I never succeeded in getting hold of one. However, I was fortunate enough to acquire an *indondo*²⁰ also out of brass. This is extremely rare—my teacher Timoth Matonsi presented me with this *indondo* for the museum. The hoes made by the Zulus are exceptionally heavy, but they are not durable, probably due to impurities in the iron and because the blacksmiths had not mastered the art of tempering. Today ironsmelting from ore is not common anymore, blacksmiths use bought iron. I was, however, still able to buy a rock from Hloma, the likes of which were used for smelting iron. The spears, which are forwarded, are made not out of iron produced by the Zulus, but from scrap iron supplied by customers. One sees a variety of old steel objects lying about, old plough shares, wagon and wheel rims, etc. Usually the blacksmiths did not charge for their work, they kept the rest of the steel supplied as payment. It takes Hloma two days to make a spear, depending on the size or type of spear, for they have a variety of different spears, from the broad spear for killing elephants or buffalo to the tiny throwing spear. Today the price without shaft ranges from 5/- to 2/6d. Hloma has enough work. He now teaches his sons and nephews, who have, however, not yet mastered the art very well. For attaching a

shaft he invariably charges 1/-. The sharpening or polishing demands most time, as they have no files, at the most an old blunt one. They have to forge everything roughly first, the rest is done by grinding. In the vicinity of our homestead there must have been an old smithy in the days gone by, judging by the amount of slag and stones used for sharpening.

How their iron was produced Hloma could not or would not tell me. All I managed to find out was the following: The iron was won from a type of ore called *umgubane*.²¹ This is found in the Nkandhla Forest, and at the Umhlatuze River. Lately I heard that in the vicinity of the Ukela River, i.e. in Natal, this ore was dug for at a place where until recently a sort of mine could be recognised. Unfortunately since then everything has been levelled for cultivation.'



Fig. 4. 'The actual smithy of Hloma. There is little to explain in this picture. I would only mention that blowing (the bellows) is not so simple. One has to learn it fundamentally.'

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The material purchased from Hloma Mathonsi by the Rev. Dedekind included spears, the bellows, the horns, the tuyère and the hammer. The Dedekind family recall packing and despatching the collection to the Hermannsburg Mission Museum in Germany in 1930, but evidently it never arrived. No trace of it has been found subsequently.

Historically the portion of the Mzinyathi valley which is the scene of this account has long been involved in iron working. Late Iron Age smelting sites are known from both Elandskraal and Rorkes Drift. Many more would surely be forthcoming if the area was to be searched thoroughly. The Cunu people whom Bryant (1929) places close to this area before the time of King Shaka were well-known iron smelters and smiths.

The lower Mzinyathi valley is very broken country with few roads. It remains today a relatively conservative area where for example traditional dress and bead work are still frequently to be seen. Iron smithing likewise survived here for, in addition to Hloma Mathonsi, there are records of a smith Yizwa Mdlalosi and his son Mgodi who made hoes and spears for the ritual slaughter of cattle in the Mangeni area just south of Hlazakazi (Hall & Maggs 1979).

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NOTES

¹ Hlazakazi mountain is 10 km south-east of Isandlwana. The account suggests that the smithy was on the south side of Hlazakazi.

² Van Warmelo argues that Mzinyathi means the water or river of the buffalo (root *nzi* = water + *inyathi* = buffalo), however Koopman (1983) argues against this derivation as not being in accord with Zulu linguistic rules.

³ *Induna* = headman.

⁴ Smithies were invariably separated from the smith's homestead (Angus 1849, Bryant 1949).

⁵ Smithies were generally screened off partly or completely by reed, grass or stone structures. (Angus 1849, Bryant 1929, Gibson 1911).

⁶ *Voorslag* (Afrikaans) = Whip-lash, often made from antelope skin.

⁷ An awl, usually made of iron, was used to make the holes for the 'thread' in the traditional method of sewing.

⁸ This is of interest since at least one other source on Zulu smithing states that tuyères were not fired (Gibson 1911). There were evidently local variations in this aspect.

⁹ *umNqawe* = *Acacia nilotica*, *umTholo* = *Acacia caffra* (Ross 1972). Both species have particularly hard wood, while *A. caffra* seems to have been a preferred wood for smelting in the Tugela Basin (Maggs 1982).

¹⁰ The high cost presumably reflects the distance from which the stone had to be transported. This seems to be the only reference to the importance of obtaining the correct stone for anvils.

¹¹ Battle of Ulundi, 4 July 1879.

¹² *Khandempemvu* ('whiteheads') or *umCijo* regiment formed in about 1867 during King Mpande's reign from young men born around 1848. This indicates that Hloma Mathonsi was about 80 at the time of the visit.

¹³ Edlokweni is the name of a hill and area near Maphumulo on the lower Tugela.

¹⁴ Mahlaba is 10 km south-west of Hlazakazi. Clearly the smith's family had a long history in this particular area of the Mzinyathi Valley.

¹⁵ In the months following the Battle of Isandlwana, 22 January 1879, there was skirmishing across the Mzinyathi in both directions. The incident seems to have occurred at this time.

¹⁶ It is not clear whether the discussion which follows, on *izitakazelo* or praise names, is based on Mathonsi's evidence or the Rev. Dedekind's own knowledge of Zulu custom.

¹⁷ 'Hail, King! You who are black; you who were growing while others were loitering.'

¹⁸ Nkandla Forest was probably the main ironworking area for the Zulu Kingdom in the nineteenth century.

¹⁹ This story is repeated, with variations, by several sources on Zulu history.

²⁰ Large, spherical brass bead about 2,5 cm in diameter worn around the neck.

²¹ Laterite or ferricrete.

²² Dolerite, which is not an iron ore.

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